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ABSTRACT

Most Russian courses suffer from an inadequate approach to the presentation of syntax even though continued emphasis on syntax from the beginning would help to remove the trial and error syndrome inherent in purely audiolingual methods and would channel the student's efforts to internalize and make automatic his answers in a relevant context, thus making his studying more efficient. Such a syntactic approach often provides the only meaningful explanation of the differentiation of ostensibly similar (to the student) grammatical forms. Essential to any first-year course are a variety of sentence structures including embedded, interrogative, and declarative sentence types, and relative clause constructions. (Author/VM)

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TEACHING SYNTAX IN ELEMENTARY AND INTERMEDIATE RUSSIAN COURSES

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The methodology of foreign language teaching in general, and the teaching of Russian in specific, falls somewhere between two diametrically opposed extremes; these are the stimulus-response and cognitive approaches. In our field, the behavioralist approach is exemplified by the so-called "pure" ALM course, which is still relatively prevalent despite the fact that its theoretical basis has long been discredited. The best example of the purely cognitive approach to the teaching of Russian with which I am familiar is an experimental course (now in its second year) run by Professors Howard Daugherty and Dale Planck at the University of Colorado. This course is taught from a syntactical point of view, with the morphology presented in an order wholly determined by the order in which syntactical constructs are taught.[1]

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[1] Students are expected neither to produce nor comprehend oral Russian; on the other hand, they apparently achieve in one year a mastery in reading far beyond that of students in a traditional four-skill course.

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Most of us, however, fall somewhere between these poles. Each chooses the mix of pattern drills, readings, grammatical explanations, etc., appropriate to his training, past experience, and personal predilections. Grammatical (morphological) discussions range from simple spelling-based rules to more or less sophisticated morphophonemic and morphemic analyses.

In almost all areas of language teaching diversification is the hallmark of our methodology. With one exception, and that exception is syntax. Regardless of one's orientation vis a vis morphology, it seems, the teacher's approach to syntax is nearly always one of (benign?) neglect. Unfortunately, for most American teachers of Russian, syntax consists of little more than a list of conjunctions which is presented to students towards the end of the morphology presentation (traditionally, just before participles and gerunds are discussed), be that at the conslusion of the first, second, or even third year of study.

The result, quite often, of such neglect are students who are unable to read, write, or comprehend (much less produce) all but the simplest Russian sentences.

This past summer I was privileged to spend two months

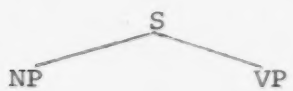
in Moscow, where I heard numerous (often quite disparaging) comments from Soviet specialists in the art of teaching Russian to non-Russians about precisely this facet of our teaching and the results manifested in our students. Continued emphasis from the very beginning on Russian syntax and its relevance, better yet--singular importance, as a basis for understanding the morphology of the language constitutes, in my opinion, the sole preimuščestvo in Soviet methodology as compared to ours.

A syntactic approach to elementary Russian offers at least two clear advantages in comparison to any non-structuralist methodology: in the first place, many grammatical topics, which are usually explained, if at all, in a needlessly complex and round-about manner that tends to confuse rather that enlighten the student, become delightfully trivial; secondly, in the realm of what one may call pure syntax, (problems of subordination, coordination, word order, etc.), a consistantly structured presentation removes the trial-and-error syndrome endemic to ALM, channels the student's efforts to internalize and make automatic his answers in an S-R context, and, thereby, makes his studying more

efficient, more likely to result in independent reproduction on his part and, quite importantly, more rewarding.

One short example will suffice to demonstrate that a syntactic approach often provides the only meaningful explanation of the differentiation of ostensibly similar (to the student) grammatical forms.

Among the more perplexing of these similarities is the relationship of the demonstrative pronoun э́то to the demonstrative adjective э́тот/э́та/э́то/э́ти. The basis for discussing this problem is first encountered in the presentation of short and long form adjectives. Given the following sentences (and their English translations):

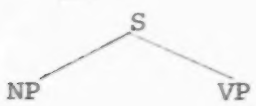


1. Сто́л --	большо́й.	The table is large.
2. Большо́й сто́л --	в столо́вой.	The large table is in the dining room.
3. Я // ви́жу	большо́й сто́л.	I see the large table.

the student will have no trouble dividing them into noun phrase (NP) and verb phrase (VP). One can then easily define attributive function of adjectives as that situa-

tion wherein the adjective and the noun it modifies occur in the same half of the sentence (2,3) and predicative function as that situation wherein the adjective and noun stand in different parts of the sentence. Short form adjectives, of course, can be used only predicatively, while long forms may occur in either attributive or predicative function.[2]

Applying the NP/VP distinction to the following sentences



1. Э́то -- большо́й сто́л.	This/that is a large table.
2. Э́тот сто́л -- большо́й.	This/that table is large.
3. Я́ // ви́жу э́тот большо́й сто́л.	I see this/that large table.

it is clear that the demonstrative adjective э́тот/э́та/э́то/э́ти fulfills the same attributive function (2,3). Э́то(1), on the other hand, has all the properties of a

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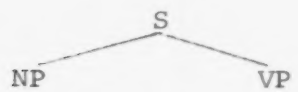
[2] This analysis will ultimately be used to explain the same distributional limitation on short and long form comparatives нове́е vs. бо́лее но́вый, etc.

pronoun; thus, for instance, it can serve as sentence subject.[3]

Examples such as



1. Э́то -- большо́е окно́.	This/that is a large window.
2. Э́то окно́ -- большо́е.	This/that window is large.
3. Я ви́жу э́то большо́е окно́.	I see this/that large window.

serve to underscore the necessity for fully dissociating in the student's mind the pronoun and its forms from the adjective and its forms. The polysemy, while unfortunate, is manageable if--and only if--the student is provided with this kind of cognitive framework. Thus prepared, students are less likely to produce a non-sentence such as

* Я ви́жу э́то большо́й сто́л.

At The Florida State University, we use Clark's Russian for Americans[4] in our basic courses. The

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[3] Similarly, one explains то́ vs. тот/та́/то́/те́ and все́ "everything", все́ "everyone" vs. ве́сь/вся́/всё/все́.

[4] Ben T. Clark, Russian for Americans (New York: Harper and Row), 1967.

demonstrative adjective э́тот/э́та/э́то/э́ти is presented in Lesson 10--near the end of our first quarter course (the pronoun э́то is introduced in Lesson A right at the very beginning of the quarter). The approach outlined above has been taught to eight separate classes of beginning students at that juncture, either by myself or by graduate teaching assistants under my direct supervision. It has been our experience that all but the very least capable students grasp the essential difference involved and make fewer mistakes both orally and in writing as various cases are introduced than more advanced students (especially those who transfer into our program) who have received other explanations.

The remainder of this paper[5] is devoted to a

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[5] The following materials were originally presented in the form of handouts which are actually used in class and which served as the basis for discussion. The unsophisticated tree diagrams were designed solely for pedagogical purposes: (D=declarative sentence; Q=interrogative sentence; q-word-interrogative words such a as кто́, како́й, почему́;Q(D)=declarative sentence embedded in question; other abbreviations have obvious

discussion of basic sentence structures which are essential components of any first-year course: first, embedded interrogative and declarative sentences, and, later, relative clause constructions.[6]

The following examples taken from the Clark textbook clearly indicate just how early in the program students encounter embedded sentences:

1. Q with q-word (p1): Ка́к пожива́ешь? Куда́ вы́ идёте?
2. Q without q-word (p14): Профе́ссор Па́влов ту́т?
3. Q(Q with q-word)(p59): Вы́ зна́ете, кто́ э́то та́м?
4. D(D) (p59): Я́ ду́маю, что э́то профе́ссор Ивано́в.

Sentences (3) and (4) appear consecutively in the same dialogue!

5. Q(Q with q-word)(p60): Вы́ зна́ете, что́ э́то тако́е?
6. D(Q with q-word)(p60): Не́т, э́то не каранда́ш, но я́ не зна́ю, ка́к сказа́ть по-ру́сски "pen".

Sentences (5) and (6) appear within three lines of one

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referents).

[6] Below, in footnotes, will be noted the point at which each subsequent topic is first introduced by Clark (and, if different, the point at which initial reference is made in our classroom discussion).

another on the very next page. Moreover, sentences (4) and (5) exemplify (with not a single word of explanation) the extremely troublesome distinction between the unstressed conjunction [štə] "that" and the stressed interrogative [štó] "what", each in conjunction with pronominal э́то .

Although sentences of the type

7. D(Q without q-word)(p439): Вам звони́л му́ж и спра́шивал, не хоти́те ли вы́ пойти́ на бале́т сего́дня ве́чером.

are first broached in Lesson 21[7], the ли-particle appears, with explanation, in Lesson 6:

8. Q without q-word (p78): Идёте ли вы́ сего́дня в го́род?

Left to their own devices, most students will have great difficulty distinguishing among these structures when encountered in reading materials and will be incapable of rendering that distinction orally

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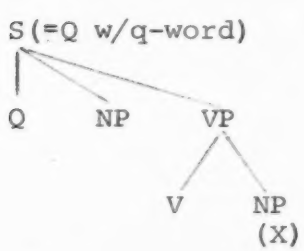
[7] Week four of our third course.

[8] The following, however, occrus without explanation on p.70 as a reading text question: Думаю ли я, что Андрей сегодня болен?

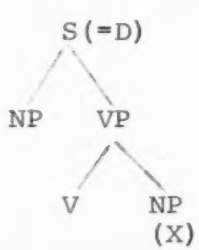
except in memorized dealogues, a technique, incidently, which we ignore after week three. Only the very best students possessing a good knowledge of English grammar and some prior foreign language experience will even perceive that a problem exists. However, with a reasoned explanation, most students can learn to handle these subtleties without much trouble, at least in simple sentences, even in their fourth week of Russian.

First, sentences such as "Кто́ зна́ет его́ и́мя?" and "Я́ зна́ю его́ и́мя" are presented (it being easy to avoid the inherent problem of case--one learns how to take advantage of the student's ignorance as well as his intuition) to exemplify the sentence frame

"Who knows X?"



"I know X."



The direct object frame is then replaced by a sentence--specifically, a question with a question

word:

X= Кто́ э́то та́м?

Which yields:

Вы́ зна́ете, кто́ э́то та́м?

Я́ зна́ю, кто́ э́то та́м.

This can be drilled effectively in a question/answer oral exercise, and expanded to include other interrogative sentences:

X= Куда́ вы́ идёте?

X= Ка́к его́ зову́т?

X= Где́ на́ш профе́ссор?

X= Почему́ они́ зде́сь?

X= Что́ э́то тако́е?

The last example is extremely important, since it yields sentence (5) above:

Вы́ зна́ете, что́ э́то тако́е?

The main clause can be varied as well, leaving the X-element unchanged.

One now proceeds to declarative sentences, embedding them into both interrogative and declarative main clauses,[9] with an explanation of the func-

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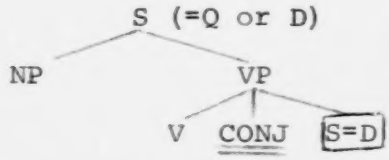
[9] Clearly this methodology presupposes--and, inci-

tion and obligatory nature (as opposed to English) of the unstressed conjunction [štə]:



Он хорошо́ чита́ет по-ру́сски.

Вы́ зна́ете, (later: Зна́ете ли вы), что́ он хорошо́ чита́ет по-ру́сски?

Все́ зна́ют, что́ он хорошо́ чита́ет по-ру́сски.

The last example in this portion of the description should be one such as:

Э́то--профе́ссор Па́влов.

Вы́ ду́маете, что́ э́то--профе́ссор Па́влов?

Я́ ду́маю, что́ э́то--профе́ссор Па́влов.

This, of course, generates sentence (4) above. Only at this point can most students clearly understand

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dently, offers an extremely congenial framework for--some description of the intonational problems involved in sentences such as:

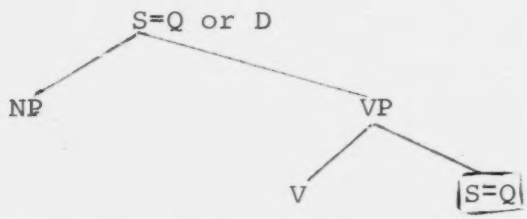
Вы́ зна́ете, что́ э́то тако́е?

Вы́ зна́ете, что́ э́то тако́е.

and use the powerful generalizations and the real structural differences hidden in sentences (4) and (5):

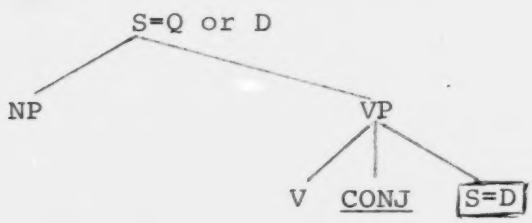
Вы́ зна́ете, что́ э́то тако́е?

Я́ зна́ю, что́ э́то тако́е.



Вы́ ду́маете, что э́то--профе́ссор Па́влов?

Я́ ду́маю, что э́то--профе́ссор Па́влов.



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And keep in mind that the students who learn this distinction have been studying Russian for only four weeks.

Finally, when these students formally encounter if/whether and if/conditional statements, they will have very little tendency to try to utter incorrect sentences such as

* Я́ не зна́ю, е́сли о́н пойдёт за́втра.

instead of

Я не зна́ю, пойдёт ли о́н за́втра.

once they realize that they are merely embedding a question without a q-word and that Russian accomplishes this with the ЛИ-particle variant.

Relative clauses are equally susceptible to a fairly simple analysis if one limits the presentation to the kinds of sentences that appear in first year textbooks.[10] In a rapid discussion of English relative clauses, one can introduce several important points: the relative pronoun allows for the synthesis of any two sentences which contain "identical noun phrases" by replacing the second of these; the relative pronoun must be moved as close as possible to the beginning of its phrase (a concept which is refined and demonstrated later); finally, like the conjunction [štə] and, again, unlike English, the relative pronoun cannot be deleted.

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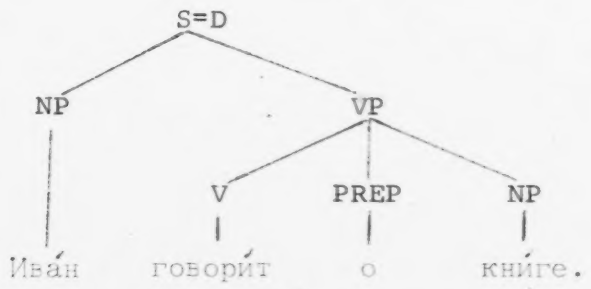
[10] Clark introduces relative clauses in Lesson 19, the first new lesson covered in our third course, i.e., well before if/whether statements are first discussed by him.

Matrix sentence

[Main clause]:

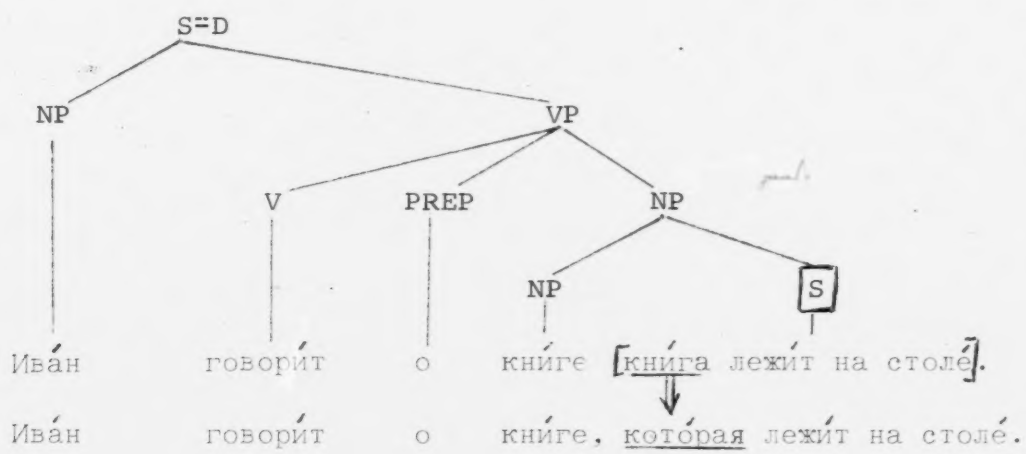


Constituent sentence

[Subordinate clause]:

Кни́га лежи́т на столе́.

Structurally, one is embedding the constituent sentence into the identical noun phrase of the matrix sentence:



This is accomplished by means of a relativization transformation, which consists of three stages:

1) Identical NP--→кото́р - (a stem in word-formational terminology);

2) The relative pronoun, which is morphologically an adjective, must, like any adjective in Russian, agree in gender, number, and case with the noun it--here--replaces (remember--it is also a pronoun!). That is, specifically, the grammatical case of the relative pronoun will be the same as that of the second "identical noun phrase"--the one in the constituent sentence[11];

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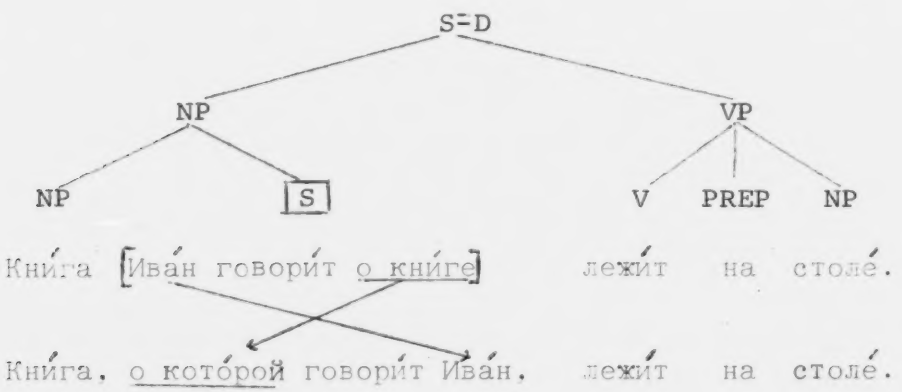
[11] This analysis represents an improvement on the traditional explanation (embodied in my original paper) that a relative pronoun "agrees in gender and number with the noun it modifies, but retains the case of the noun that it replaces." Gender and number must be identical in any event, and this formulation maintains, rather than apparently contradicts, the by now well-memorized catch phrase that "adjectives agree with the nouns they modify in gender, case, and number".

3) Transposition, which will be explained immediately.

Transposition is best exemplified by retaining the same two basic sentences, but switching the roles of matrix and constituent sentence (the English introduction will have shown that either sentence may be subordinated to the other):



Transposition takes place (at least theoretically) in the first example as well, but results in no ostensible change, since the relative pronoun is already located in its appropriate position.

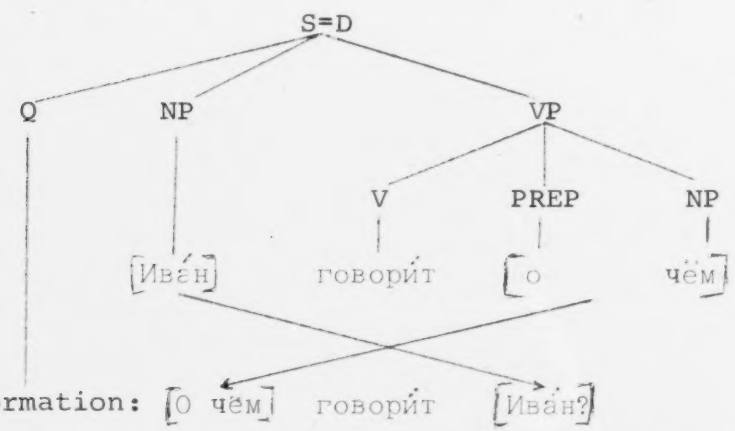
The transposition process itself may seem strange to the students at first, despite the fact that its analogue exists in English:

John is talking about the book.

The book, about which John is talking, is on the table.

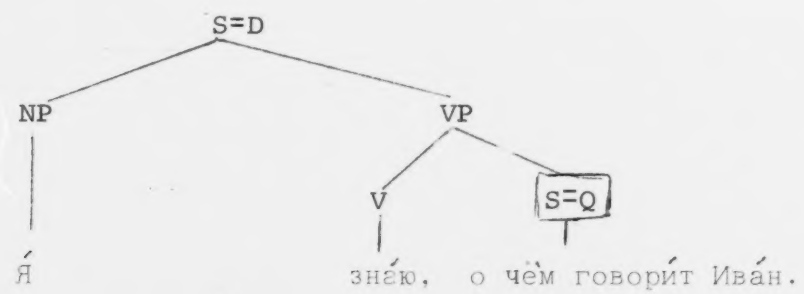
In fact, however, they have been employing it for several months already whenever they have formed a question utilizing a question word:

Ива́н говори́т о кни́ге.



Q-transformation: [О чём] говори́т [Ива́н?]

Further, by returning to the problem of embedded questions, the teacher eliminates forever one of the most ghastly syntactical errors ever committed by a beginning Russian student:



After such an analysis, no reasonably intelligent student will attempt to utter the following:

*Кни́га, о чём говори́т Ива́н, лежи́т на столе́.

The foregoing presentation has demonstrated (and our classroom experience at The Florida State University has confirmed) that a careful, step-by-step explanation of Russian syntax can be used to great advantage in elementary classes, that the student gains a clearer idea of just what happens in the language than he does via any purely behavioralist approach, that he will perform better orally and avoid many egregious errors, and, finally, that, from the student's viewpoint, Russian is not nearly as difficult to master to at least some verifiable (and satisfying) degree as he had been led to believe.